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MEMORIAL

OF

JOHN BERTRAM.

BY

Edward S. Atwood.

[From Historical Collections of the Essex Institute, Vol. XXI.]

SALEM, MASS.
PRINTED FOR THE ESSEX INSTITUTE.
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BY EDWARD S. ATWOOD.

In the palmy days of the Roman empire, when a man grew eminent in art and literature, or had rendered distinguished service in the forum or on the battle-field, it was the custom of the Senate to pass a decree declaring that the man "had deserved well of the state." This grave and formal action served a double purpose; it was an appropriate civic testimonial to the man who had given the highest possible evidence of his devotion to the common weal, and at the same time it encouraged and inspired other men to follow his illustrious example. The custom of the Roman senate was an admirable precedent. It is well for any state or community to formally emphasize its appreciation of men who in any walk in life, or any department of work, have not only secured individual success, but have gone further, and made that success the reason and the instrument for promoting the general welfare. This civic recognition is after a fashion a reward for service rendered, but what is more, and more

[1] Read before the Essex Institute, Monday, Feb. 4, 1884.

important, it is a healthy stimulus to like exertions on the part of others, a stimulus greatly needed in a state of society, where selfishness is so apt to be the sovereign law. It helps, also, to look at the outcome of homely virtues and honest purposes in the concrete, to unthread the web of some life, that has made itself felt as a power, and find that its influence has not been secured by brilliant talents and exceptional genius, but that the common every-day excellences of industry and perseverance and economy and fidelity are both the warp and the woof of its substance; and most helpful and healthful of all is the revelation that, even in a selfish world, unselfishness is counted as the whitest item in the record of any life, that when men are gone, they are estimated by what they expended rather than by what they accumulated, and that when the sum total of individual assets is forgotten, the community keeps fresh in its memory, the largess and liberality of a life, that was opulent and blossoming with kindly and generous charities.

A sketch of the life of Capt. John Bertram must of necessity be a story of one of these significant personal histories. The thing that makes the name of John Bertram so fragrant in this community is not the fact of his eminent business success. Prosperity of that sort is not exceptional in the annals of American life. He is chiefly remembered for the way in which he reached success and for the use which he made of his success when it was reached. And of the two, this last item is the more salient, the more distinct and crystalline in the public thought. How Capt. Bertram became what he was is not known by many; but what he was, and continues to be, to this community, is recognizable in our public institutions of benevolence, in scores of the homes of the honest poor, where his dead hand kindles day by day, the fires that warm and cheer,

and defy the wintry rigors of our bleak coast, in hospitable houses of refuge, where from January to January he spreads the table and prepares the bed for age and want. And so it is most fitting that this Institute should put his name on record among its annals of builders and benefactors of the municipality, as one who has deserved exceedingly well of the community.

John Bertram was born in the Isle of Jersey, Feb. 11, 1796. His family were residents of the Parish of St. Saviour to which parish his ancestry, as far back as he was able to trace it, had always belonged. The ancient parish church is still standing. The Bertram family belonged to the middle class, in the somewhat peculiar society of the unique island, which is both French and English. The maiden name of Capt. Bertram's mother was Mary Perchard. His education was commenced in a French school on the island. He was first placed under the care of a male teacher, but somewhat later sent to a woman's school, and the year before leaving Jersey he was a pupil in an English school. When the old home was broken up in 1807, by the emigration of the family to America, John was the only one of the household who understood English, and to the end of a long life he retained his knowledge of the two languages.

From his earliest recollection, Capt. Bertram had heard the plan of emigration discussed, but it was not until six children had been added to the household that it was finally carried out. There were three boys and three girls in the family when they left Jersey, the oldest eleven years of age; the youngest, six months. In July, 1807, they embarked in the ship "Alert" of, and bound to, Baltimore. The voyage was long and uncomfortable, and the ship, proving leaky, put into Boston, Sept. 1, 1807. Here Capt. Bertram's father came into communica-

tion with Capt. Pinel of Salem to whom he had brought letters of introduction. Capt. Pinel advised the family not to go elsewhere, but establish themselves in Salem, and acting on that advice the senior Bertram came to this city and set up his home. John was sent to school to Master Hacker to complete his education. Two years later in 1809, the senior Bertram opened a grocery store, and John was taken from school to serve as general assistant. The business venture proved unsuccessful, and the next year the elder Bertram built a house and workshop on Central St., still retaining the boy in his employ. It was soon found that John had no mechanical taste, and wearying of the uncongenial work, he made up his mind to follow the sea, which was the grand passion of the Salem boys of that day. It is hard, in this time of rotting wharves and decayed commerce, to realize the marine enthusiasm of that earlier date, and yet recalling the years when the famous East Indiamen were discharging their costly cargoes along Derby street, and loaded drays rattled along the rough pavements, and every departure and arrival of ships had thrown over it the color and glow of romance, it is easy to see with what enthusiasm a boy would welcome the exchange from a dingy workshop for the freshness of the open sea, and the adventure in foreign ports. In December, 1812, Captain Bertram, then sixteen years old, shipped for his first voyage, on board the ship "Hazard," bound for Alexandria and Lisbon, and sailing under a British license to secure her from capture. He was rated on the vessel's list as a boy, and received five dollars a month. The ship arrived at Alexandria Jan. 13, 1813, where she took in a cargo of flour and proceeded to Lisbon, reaching that port sometime in February. At Lisbon the vessel loaded with salt and sailed for America, reaching Portland in the June or early July of 1813; and

from Portland young Bertram secured passage to Salem in a coaster, arriving home in the middle or latter part of the summer.

The boy's first experience encouraged him in his chosen pursuit, and after a few weeks on shore he shipped as cabin boy in November, 1813, on board the private armed schooner "Monkey," Captain Glover." The vessel sailed for Charleston November 27, but was hardly out of the harbor when she was pursued by an enemy's ship, and chased into Gloucester where she laid for several days. Hoping at last that the coast was clear, she weighed anchor early in the morning and started on her voyage, but before noon found a frigate in hot pursuit of her. A timely snow squall hid the vessels from each other, during which the "Monkey" escaped, and proceeded, sighting no other sail, until off Charleston, when she was again chased and again eluded her pursuer, reaching Charleston December 29.

Captain Bertram remained with the vessel until March, when he was discharged, and on March 1, 1814, he shipped at Charleston on board the privateer "Herald," Captain Miller. The "Herald" was a vessel of 300 tons burden, carrying 125 men and 9 guns. She cruised for a while about the Western islands and Madeira, and then sailed for Portugal. During the cruise they captured a British packet in ballast, and with others, Captain Bertram was put on board of her as a prize crew and ordered to Charleston or Savannah. But fortune turned against them, and they in turn were captured by the "Lacedemonian" frigate and carried to Bermuda and were transferred to the prison ship "Alicant." A fleet was about to sail for England under convoy, and as seamen were scarce it was arranged to ship a part of the prisoners as sailors. Among the men detached for

this service was Captain Bertram, who sailed for Liverpool December 14, 1814. The vessel proved unseaworthy and, unable to put back to Bermuda, put into St. Thomas leaking badly. Here several American vessels were found at anchor, and the prisoners leaving their captain in the lurch, made their escape to their countrymen, and in two days reached Porto Rico. Here they went on board an American vessel and started for home, but within forty-eight hours were captured a second time and sent to Barbadoes. They remained at Barbadoes while a frigate was fitted to carry a cargo of prisoners to England, for which country they sailed in the early part of 1815. During the voyage they received rough and harsh treatment at the hands of their captors until they were near England, when they spoke the ship "Liverpool Packet" of and from Boston who informed them that peace had been concluded. On arriving at Plymouth, the prisoners were sent on board the prison-ship where they remained until June. They left Plymouth in June of 1815, in a British brig which was crowded with prisoners. The vessel was bound for New York, but when off the coast the prisoners compelled the captain to put into Boston, and landing there Captain Bertram walked to Salem, reaching home very much the worse for wear.

On reaching Salem Captain Bertram learned that the privateer to which he had been attached had made several captures and he proceeded to New York to receive his share of the prize money. Allowing himself only a brief interval of rest, he shipped in September in 1815 on board a brig commanded by Captain Groce bound for Fayal and Pernambuco. The vessel put in at Maranham, and later on went to Para and Martinique, reaching Salem on the return voyage in April, 1816. The next month, May, 1816, Captain Bertram shipped in the brig "Betsey,"

Captain Shillaber, bound for the Mediterranean, thence to Buenos Ayres. At this latter port a cargo of hides was taken for Boston, where the vessel arrived in August, 1817. Before the end of the month the indefatigable sailor was afloat again, this time in the brig "Abby M," Captain Wilson, bound for Martinique. While at Martinique they encountered a furious hurricane, whose tremendous force compelled them as their only chance of escape to slip the cable and put to sea. The expedient was only partially successful. They had escaped one danger to encounter another. The violence of the storm compelled them to cut away the masts to save themselves from wreck. Riding out the gale in safety they rigged jury masts and got into St. Thomas, where the vessel was comdemned as unseaworthy, and Captain Bertram took passage for Boston arriving in November, 1817. The following month, December, 1817, he sailed from Salem in the bark "Patriot," Captain Fry, bound to Genoa, thence to Gallippoli. Freighting there with a cargo of oil, the vessel sailed for St. Petersburgh, arriving August 18, and reaching Salem the following October. He next shipped as mate on the brig "Eunice," Captain Wardwell, for Gibraltar, thence to Bahia and home where he arrived August, 1819. In October, he sailed on the same vessel, under the command of Captain Rice, bound for India. Here the brig loaded with coffee for Amsterdam, arriving at that port July, 1820, reaching home in September.

In October he shipped again for the same voyage, but the price of coffee was found to be so high that the vessel proceeded to Batavia and thence to Sumatra, where she finally secured a cargo and sailed for Antwerp. While at Antwerp the vessel was ordered home. Captain Bertram then shipped as mate on the brig "Java," Capt. W. H. Neal, bound for Batavia. Failing to find coffee there the

vessel proceeded to Mocha, and in October, 1822, sailed for Genoa, arriving March, 1823. It was during this voyage that Captain Bertram first conceived the idea of doing business in the Mozambique channel. There being no demand for coffee, the brig was delayed in Genoa waiting orders until July, when she sailed for Marseilles and took in a cargo of wine, returning to Salem in Oct., 1823.

On reaching home after this voyage, Captain Bertram was married to Miss Mary Smith, and in December following sailed in the "Java," Captain Proctor, for Mauritius. The vessel arrived in March, and loading with sugar arrived back in Salem in July, 1824. On the voyage home the "Java" touched at St. Helena, and while here Captain Bertram became convinced that a light assorted cargo made up of what he called "nick-nacks" would be likely to sell well. On reaching Salem he confided his impressions in a quiet way to a few others, who were so satisfied with the soundness of his judgment that they joined with him in chartering the schooner "General Brewer," which was loaded with an assorted cargo and sailed from Boston in August, 1824, on the day that La Fayette entered the city.

The schooner proved to be leaky, and the voyage to the equator was long and uncomfortable. Near the line the "Brewer" fell in with the brig "Elizabeth," Captain Story. Captain Bertram knew that the brig had stopped at St. Helena on her last trip, and he at once suspected that she was bound on the same errand as himself. From suspecting he at last grew certain that he had a rival in his venture, and prepared himself for a trial of speed, but the "Elizabeth" proved herself a faster sailer than the "Brewer." Not to be defeated in his purpose Captain Bertram waited until dark and then in spite of the remon-

strances of the mate, ordered the deck load, consisting of 10,000 feet of lumber to be thrown overboard. In the morning the "Elizabeth" was nowhere to be seen, and the "Brewer" proceeded to St. Helena. As she entered the harbor, Captain Bertram enquired of the pilot in regard to American shipping in port and found the "Elizabeth" had not arrived. Before the anchor was fairly down, Captain Bertram was on shore negotiating for the sale of his cargo. Within forty-eight hours he had disposed of it to advantage, and the "Brewer" was nearly ready for sea when the "Elizabeth" made her appearance to find the market fully stocked.

From St. Helena he proceeded to Pernambuco to sell three hundred kegs of powder, and there taking in a load of hides he left for Boston where he arrived in January, 1825. In company with others he purchased the schooner "Velocity" of one hundred and twenty tons, and in February sailed for St. Helena. Not finding a ready market there he kept on to the Cape of Good Hope and went up the African coast, hearing that there was opportunity for trade in various ports. The business centres were found to be under the control of the Portuguese government, and the American vessel was warned off by the authorities; so the "Velocity" stretched away for Patagonia, and on arriving was hauled up the Rio Negro to fresh water where she was caulked and sheathed. Disappointed in a cargo Captain Bertram sent the schooner to Buenos Ayres while he remained behind to collect hides and beef. The "Velocity" on her return brought the news of war with Brazil, and Captain Bertram loading the vessel with beef sailed to Montevideo, where he disposed of his cargo to the Brazilian authorities. Returning to the Rio Negro in May, he sailed for home in June. Touching on the way at Bahia he purchased a brig in which he

went back to Rio Negro, sending the "Velocity" home. Loading the brig with horns, hides and beef, he left on the return voyage in October and reached home in Dec., 1826, having been absent nearly two years. This enterprise Captain Bertram in later days considered one of the most successful voyages he had ever made.

In February, 1827, he made another trip to Rio Negro, arriving back in August. The "St. Michael's" was then purchased and left for the same port in October (1827). From there Captain Bertram despatched the vessel home, while he remained to arrange for larger business; but both vessels returning before his preparations were completed, he was forced to submit to further delay, and did not reach home until August, 1829. Now for the first time in many years he allowed himself a breathing spell and remained on shore seventeen months. In 1830 he bought one quarter of the ship "Black Warrior," and taking command of her sailed in December of that year. During that voyage he went to Madagascar, the African coast, Bombay and Mocha. He sailed from the latter port in July for the Seychelles islands, thence to Zanzibar, to Brava, to Lamoo where he took in two hundred frails of dates, thence to Majunga (Madagascar) where he completed his lading, sailing for home in January, 1832, and arriving in March. It was the last time he commanded a vessel. His severe and unintermitting labor had told on a naturally vigorous constitution. From 1812 to 1832, a period of twenty years, he had kept every power of mind and body on the stretch, and nature demanded what he had so fairly earned, some respite from arduous toil.

Though freed from the exposure and exhaustion of active life at sea, he had no idea of folding his hands and sitting idle. He continued in trade with Michael Shepard, Na-

thaniel Weston, and others; but, during the winter of 1834, it became evident that he was still overworked, and by the advice of physicians, he started on a journey, April 20, 1835. He set out in primitive fashion, with horse and chaise and a trunk strapped to the axle, and was absent until the following October. During this extended trip, he made himself familiar with large parts of New England. It often delighted him in his latter days to recount the homely incidents and experiences of this, the first journey which he ever took for anything but business.

In March, 1837, his wife died; and added to his trouble, were business complications, brought on by the financial stringency of that critical year. He, however, pulled through these difficulties without shipwreck, and the next year, 1838, sent a vessel to Bombay and Mocha. In the course of this year, he was married to Clara, widow of Capt. J. H. Millet. In January, 1841, he sailed for Europe, revisiting the old home in Jersey. In the autumn he was elected a member of the Legislature, as he was subsequently in 1857 and 1863.

In 1847, he commenced business with Para, on his own account, and continued it until 1857. In 1847, his wife died; and June 27, 1848, he married Miss Mary Ann Ropes, who survives him.

In 1848, he commenced business with California. On December 22 of that year, he despatched the brig "Eliza," Capt. Perkins, which was the first vessel sent from the States after the discovery of gold, and the third vessel which arrived from any port. The "Eliza" was the first vessel to reach Sacramento, where she was sold to serve as a receiving ship. He subsequently built a number of ships for the trade, most of them clippers, some of them very large. From 1852 to 1858, he gradually narrowed the range of his commercial business, until at last he

confined it to the Zanzibar trade. In 1856, he became interested in western railroads and carried into the new business, the energy and caution and foresight which had characterized him in other departments of activity. His ability, here, as elsewhere, commanded success, and his faculty for organization enabled him to spend his last years with his business so well in hand, that he was free from anxiety, and relieved from over-burdensome labor. In his quiet office he shaped his plans and dotted on the map the ports to which to send his ventures, and held in his hand the leash of the ships that went to and fro on his errands.

It was the Divine ordinance that his last years should be years of trial to one so active and energetic. The busy limbs were condemned to inaction, the busier brain was limited in its workings — only the old love of doing good retained its immortal freshness. "I want to live," he often said, "so long as I can do good, no longer." Yet these years of seclusion were not sad years to him. He had the kindest and most tender ministry of household affection. The world, into which he could not go, came to him. The faces of old friends cheered his solitude. The daily journals kept him abreast with the whirl of the outside life. Choice books afforded him companionship. His seclusion was only the quiet of harvest time, when summer suns have lost their fierceness and winter winds have not begun to blow— the October of life, when all is profoundest rest. He had no business complications to adjust, no unsatisfied ambitions to gratify. Serene and secure in his more than fourscore years of honorable and estimable living, he waited for his change of worlds to come. It came at last, but not with suddenness of shock and surprise. As often in his voyages outward or homeward bound, he had seen the continents he was leaving grow slowly dim with distance, till they melted into the blue of the horizon, so

gently he drifted from these coasts of time, sinking well remembered headland after headland till he felt the surge and swell of eternity's sea, and then he was with God and the hereafter. Having reached a serene and contented old age, honored and beloved by the whole community, he died March 22, 1882, at the ripe term of eighty-six years.

Capt. Bertram was a remarkable specimen of a man who believes that success in business is reducible to law. He never allowed himself to be dazzled with the dream of some unexpected good fortune. He recognized the fact that there is no certainty of prosperity, without the constant exercise of the homely virtues of prudence, industry, and perseverance, and back of all, a sturdy unfaltering purpose. He succeeded because he made up his mind in the beginning to succeed; and all through life made everything tributary to that determination. He did not consider his prosperity exceptional, in the sense that he had reached it because he was an elect man; his theory was, that any man might be prosperous, who was willing to comply with the antecedent conditions. He frequently exhibited great interest in young men, and criticised habits and practices, which he thought would prove obstacles to their success. So certain was he that what is called good fortune, is a science, and an intelligible science, that he frequently remarked that he had noted down in a little diary, some things which would be helpful to young men; things whose truthfulness had been confirmed to him by more than fourscore years of experience. In that diary occurs this passage, written as the conclusion reached as the result of a deliberate and clear visioned survey of what was confessedly and exceptionally a successful business life.

"It will be natural for persons to enquire, how from a a poor boy, I became rich. Many reasons I could give.

1. I gave my mind and energy to everything I undertook.

2. I was very economical, but never mean.

3. I used a great deal of self-denial, never going on pleasure for the sake of it; and I always kept respectable company.

4. Never using to this day, either liquor or tobacco in any form; and only a little wine, daily, for these three years, by the advice of my doctor. This had a great deal to do with my prosperity, not only by great saving, but it insured business, which was of great importance, as I had neither relative nor friend of the least influence, and only such of the last as I made by my course through life.

5. Although I never learned to spend money, this did not deter me from giving to the needy, nor to good objects."

It would be difficult to find a more concise or more self-commending compendium of practical wisdom than these five brief entries. The scrupulous use of time and force, self restraint, a sturdy sovereignty of purpose, and an open heart and hand to human want; these elements of strength and prophecies of success in life are all stated in simplest phrase. Until they have been disproved by honest trial resulting in failure, they may fairly stand as causes of business prosperity. Besides this Capt. Bertram had "the courage of his convictions." What he believed to be right, that he tried to do. When a mere boy, he promised to abstain from intoxicating drinks, and he kept his word faithfully in a profession and among surroundings that might have shaken the firmest purpose. Once, on his return from a voyage, he was enticed by his shipmates into a saloon in New York. The glasses were filled and placed in glittering line before the company, but, before the health went round, he remembered his mother's face

and recalled his plighted word; and, making excuse for a moment's absence, he went out of the door and ran at full speed towards the wharves, where he found a vessel bound for Providence, to sail that evening, and, securing passage, he hid himself till night for fear his comrades might find him, and persuade or force him out of his scruples. A young man of that firmness of purpose was sure to get on in the world. At one time, being in a foreign port where gambling was legalized, he purchased a ticket in a lottery, which drew a large prize. At first he was highly elated, but on sober second thought he concluded that if schemes of that sort fascinated him so much, there was something wrong and perilous about them, and so, struggling as he was for a livelihood — and with dollars not over plenty in his purse — and so,— can this generation believe it?—he *returned the money;* and that was the beginning and end of his investments in that immoral line. The old proverb has it that "straws show which way the wind blows;" but these things were not straws, but strands in character, evidencing the toughness of their moral fibre. Fortitude in the presence of plausible temptation; how noble a thing it is; alas, how rare!

The wealth, so hardly and honestly earned, was dispensed with a glad and generous liberality. Capt. Bertram's private charities were innumerable. For him to learn of want was to make certain that he would attempt to alleviate it, and he was always in the way of learning of it. He was beset behind and before, in person and by letter. His house and office were whispering galleries always resonant with the voices of real or pretended need; and yet he was seldom, if ever, impatient of the multiplicity of the demands made upon him. "Charity," he said once, "what merit is there in charity? It pleases me to give it, and I don't know how, but somehow it seems to pay about

ten per cent on the investment." It was the recognition in business phrase of the integrity of the Divine assurance that "He that watereth, shall himself be watered." His public benefactions were munificent. His gifts to the Salem Hospital, his establishment of the Bertram Home for Aged Men, his legacy to the Children's Friends' Society, his Fuel Fund kept in trust by the city, his contributions during the war, and since the war in the interests of the soldiers, his liberal donations for the education of the freedmen, his other disbursements, making a list too long for recital here, are a part of the common knowledge. It is risking nothing to say that no other citizen of Salem, was ever so profuse in well considered liberality.

During the whole course of her corporate life, Salem has been adding eminent names to the historic roll of those who are worthy to be kept in remembrance. ENDICOTT the governor, whose hand was so potent in moulding early New England, and giving permanent shape to her political institutions; STORY the jurist, than whom no man more distinguished has ever sat on the American Bench; BOWDITCH the navigator, who unriddled and read the shining runes of the heavens, and, disentangling the confusion of the stars, ranged them in order to show and light the high road across the seas; HAWTHORNE the author, the latter day mystic, to whom the realities of life were in large part dreams, and who overlaid them all with the color of his moods, till their magic seemed greater than their meaning, and the wedding music of his marriage of fancy with fact, rose clear and entrancing through the noisy air while a charmed world listened,— these, and others of large, if not equal, fame, are already catalogued in the city's annals of renown. The municipality is not making room for meaner company when it adds to the illustrious roll, the name of JOHN BERTRAM, the great merchant and philanthropist.